

What is Torticollis?

Torticollis is a term used to describe tightness in your child's neck muscles. In babies with torticollis, this muscle is shorter on one side so they lie with their head tilted to one side and rotated to the other. You may notice that your baby tends to look more in one direction than the other. The muscle affected is called the sternocleidomastoid, and joins the base of the skull to the collarbone. With treatment, the muscle will grow and stretch.

What causes it?

This isn't known although it is thought that it could be due to the limitation of space inside the mother's uterus, causing the baby's head to be stuck in one position for a period of time so that the baby is not able to move its neck.

What can happen?

If your baby does not move his head, the muscles can become stiff and tight. It can also impact on your child's head shape. Until about one year of age the bones of a baby's head are very thin and flexible, making it soft and easy to mould. Therefore a condition known as positional or deformational plagiocephaly (when one side of the head does not match up with other side) can happen. During most normal births a newborn head may appear pointy or elongated for a short time after passage through the birth canal. This usually corrects itself within six weeks after birth. If your baby prefers to look in one direction part of the skull may become flat. It is important to remember plagiocephaly does not affect the development of a baby's brain.

What can I do to help my child?

All of the following advice is to encourage your baby to turn their head towards the side they normally avoid. It is important you continue with these until your baby turns their head equally in both directions to prevent development of a plagiocephaly or facial asymmetry (when one side of the face does not match up with the other side). You may also be referred to see your local physiotherapist for further advice.

It is helpful to encourage your child to use different positions so his head is not always lying in the same position.

The following examples are for a **right head** turning preference. If your baby prefers to look to the left, reverse the instructions.

- Turn your baby's cot so he has to look to the left to see you approach.
- Put interesting cot toys or a mobile on your baby's left side to encourage him to look that way. When you put your baby on the floor think which way he will turn to see the TV, window or lights. Try to position him so all these sort of visual stimuli are on his left.
- Try turning your baby's head to the left when he is asleep. He may well turn it back but any time spent with his head to the left is helpful.
- Set aside a time every day to actively play with your baby on his tummy. Encourage him to look up and especially to the left. Make sure his elbows are under his shoulders so he can prop himself up. If he is struggling, you can put a rolled up towel under his chest to help.
- Try not to use a car seat for anything apart from being in the car. You can roll up a small towel to put behind the head hugger on the right to prevent your baby resting with his head on the right and get his head more to the middle.
- Your baby will benefit from any time that avoids his head turned to the right. Try putting him on his left hand side when he is awake. You may need to put a cushion behind him to stop him rolling back, place an interesting toy in front of him.
- When holding your baby against your shoulder put him on your right as he will turn to his left to look around and your cheek will prevent him turning to the right.
- Use a baby sling sometimes instead of the car seat or buggy when you go out, it is a different position to avoid the constant pressure on one side of baby's head.
- If your baby is bottle fed, hold him with his head on your right arm and encourage him to look round to his left for his bottle, and to see you.

How can a Physiotherapist help?

A physiotherapist can assess your child and give advice as necessary with your child possibly including positioning and stretches.